

ONCE UPON A SHAPE
or
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS
The manipulation of form to affect content

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“Things are pretty, graceful, rich, elegant, handsome; but until they speak to the imagination, not yet beautiful.” Emerson

Abstract: This paper discusses the use of a design project to advance the beginning design students’ ability to visually communicate complex themes, emotions, and content through the creation of a narrative in a simple book form. This project stresses how content may be determined through the manipulation of form.

Design is about communication, the manipulating of visual tools to form a narrative. Before words, there are images. The universal means of communication is through visual imagery. Young children seek out books with pictures, the more the better, to get stories without the need of some grownup’s translating skills. This desire for visual independence manifests into adulthood, “Show me.” “Let me see for myself.” In describing some new thing or action, we see with our mind’s eye first, then find the language to describe the visual. Even before cave walls carried images of the animals that shared early man’s world, there were surely lines drawn in the dirt or sand to communicate things that were known but as yet had no common words. The problem, then as now, has always been how to get across the deeper - sometimes more important - meaning. ‘Yes, there’s this big mastodon over by the tree. But he’s my friend. Don’t throw rocks at him.’

We start with a Design Foundations course in which the initial projects address individual design elements and their relationships to design principles. A project that uses the manipulation of form to affect content is a way to advance students’ understanding of the emotive and communicative power of design. Retelling a story as a narrative without words in book format serves as an engaging project to do that. It is a project that reinforces students’ understanding of elements and principles, clarifies their understanding of abstraction while testing their ability to select, prioritize and serialize information. A book format creates a bridge between 2D and 3D design and addresses issues of crafting. This project combines objective and subjective use of design into a personal and meaningful visual statement. The use of basic design concepts to create a purely visual and subjective narrative can be followed with discussions of the application of those concepts to reveal narratives within applied and related disciplines. This affords an opportunity for students to make a connection between the foundation design course and “real” applications of design.

A good place to start any project is at the beginning, in the void of the element space. The boundaries or format used to contain space begin immediately to set a narrative’s mood.

The square implies stability. the vertical rectangle suggests a level of anxiety, and the horizontal rectangle, repose. Just as extreme actions invite extreme responses, extremes in the presentation of space in a format set levels of expectation to a visual presentation.

Within the format, the setting of horizon lines begins to secure psychological response. A low horizon line with objects placed on that line, such as young children draw, leave those objects exposed to and unprotected from what ever storm or danger might appear, while a high horizon line, with objects placed beneath and within the shelter of the ground line, suggests that those objects are protected.

There are two basic types of visual compositions within the format, the closed and the open. In the closed, all objects are totally within the boundaries set by the format. This type of composition tells the viewer all he or she needs to know at that time. The open composition contains some or all objects that are partially off frame or out side the format's boundaries. This type of presentation invites the viewer's participation in the story telling process. He or she is invited to imagine and supply what is happening to those missing parts. While both are legitimate, the open composition affords opportunities, especially in a fold out book format, to explore visual movement as a unifying principle

The desire to describe the ephemeral - things felt instead of things seen -would seem initially to create difficulties in visualizing a story unless one is adept at drawing figures, faces and their expressions. But in actuality, simple geometric shapes have been associated with significant symbolism since ancient times. Michael S. Schneider in his book, *A Beginner's Guide to Constructing the Universe, A Primer From One to Ten*, discusses the discovery, development, application and implications of symbolic geometry, both in historical and natural contexts. While in his work he explores geometries up to ten, for our purposes we need only rely on his research through the number four. Here follows, in very condensed form, the significant aspects of the first geometries, which happily, when combined with space make up the first elements of design. One, in Greek, the monad, is symbolized by the point. When expanded, the point becomes the first shape, the circle. The first geometric shape implies perfection within itself, expansion, wholeness, harmony, unity, integration, and heaven. Two, the dyad, created when the expanded point seeks out another point on its circumference, becomes the line, the carrier of movement. At the same time this geometry creates a beginning and an end, it implies conflict between the two points, replication, duality, separateness, opposition, tension, polarity, energy, and action. As the second point on the first circle's circumference expands to form its own circle, the intersection of both circles creates the vesica piscis (translation: the gut of the fish), in spite of its name, an elegant portal through which the rest of the geometries and creation may proceed. The first of the new geometries is created with a third point at the apex of the vesica piscis. The third point, three or the triad, when linearly joined to its predecessors becomes the triangle. The symbolic associations made with the triangle are completeness, balance, wisdom, harmony, peace, reconciliation and resolution of conflict. A forth point added at the other apex of the vesica piscis allows the construction of another line crossing at right angles to the first through the centers of both circles. By placing a compass point where the two

lines cross and the pencil point of the compass at the beginning point and turning a circle, then connecting the four points where the circle crosses the lines, the construction of a tilted square results. The square or tetrad symbolizes firmness, reliability, equality, stability, and the earth. So here we have the beginning elements of design; space, point, line, and the three primary shapes, circle, triangle, and square, all with useful symbolic baggage.

Shapes beyond geometric symbolism can carry a narrative. Molly Bang in her book, *Picture This: Perception and Composition* examines and explores basic geometries and their distortions as a means of story telling. She begins with the circle, square, and triangle and discusses basic emotional responses to them. For example, when asked to choose a feminine shape from the three, most people readily respond the circle; when asked to identify the most dangerous, the most common response is the triangle; asked why, the rational is that the triangle has sharp, therefore potentially dangerous, points. The square is usually viewed as masculine and stable. Size has impact on viewers' perception. Large squares placed next small squares can bring comparisons of big possibly scary dogs with cute little puppies. Combining characteristics of two or more shapes can create complex characters. A simple example would be one of those large square dogs made feminine and potentially less threatening by using the feminine aspect of the curve to round off manly squared corners. Shapes can carry other shapes within or subtracted from them, implying characteristics at variance with or compounding their outer appearance. Distorting shapes by stretching or compressing alter perceptions of shapes and reactions to them. Extreme distortions or abstractions elicit extreme responses.

The line implies movement and direction. It visually ties things together. The quality of the line can determine the emotional quality of passage through time and space; smooth, easy, and flowing, choppy, broken, jagged or difficult. Used as horizon line, it can shelter a story's characters or expose them. The line in direction mode can reiterate a narrative's structure through its rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. Repeated, the line becomes a plane of columns or forest trees, presented vertically, a barrier, horizontally, a bridge or road. Diagonally, the line assumes its most active state. Vigorously moving uphill and down, the line can present a dangerous landscape with the sharp points of the triangle without the stability of its base. Standing next to and beneath a diagonal line in its perpetual state of beginning to fall, is an uncomfortable spot for any character in a narrative.

To our list of elements we now add and consider the emotional and societal responses to the element, value. There seems a universal response to the power of the dark side; witches and black goblins, the dark in the closet and under the bed, the black of night, the dark clouds on the horizon, the guy wearing the black hat; we all seem to know and respond cautiously to the color black. Thank goodness for angels and the light of day, our hero in shining armor, Mr. Clean, the guy in the white hat. The grey between the two, that's where most of us fall, strive or fail, persevere or quit, are humbled, or are made victims. Being human, we understand grey.

Of all the elements, color, even more than value, is the one that elicits greatest emotional response. Color preferences and prejudices are based on personal, cultural, and societal experiences and are strongly felt. A bad reaction to eating a butter and jelly sandwich as a young child may taint your emotional reaction to the color combination of red and yellow your whole life. Each color and every variation of color may carry many different meanings culturally. While white in western cultures may be associated with weddings, in much of Asia, it is associated with funerals and mourning. Red is associated with power, danger, war, blood, revolution, passion and life, purple with wisdom, age, riches, and royalty and pride. Blue suggests calmness, peace, the intellect, water and the sky, or sadness and melancholy. Green seems to speak of youth, hope, spring and growth but it can also suggest greed and illness. While yellow is often paired with the sun and happiness, it can also connote caution, cowardice and treachery. Judas is traditionally clothed in yellow. Orange may imply silliness, joy, good fortune, luxury, or a prisoner's garb, and the neutral brown may suggest the earth, poverty, humility and retreat from the world, or the subtle richness of autumn.

Color schemes, those useful recipes for making colors work together, also carry psychological impact. Elizabeth Adams Hurwitz in *Design-a search for essentials*, discusses these reactions. Generally speaking, warm colors tend to be cheerful and active, cool colors, thoughtful or mysterious. Monochromatic schemes, if the values contrast strongly, are powerful, easily unified, if simple, color combinations. When the values are close, however, these schemes project weakness, barrenness, and endless waste. A complementary scheme, with colors of equal intensity, can project conflict, antagonism, or opposition. If one color dominates, this scheme can suggest fulfillment, poise, balance, and affinity between entities. Warm analogous schemes project warm, earthy, human qualities. Cool analogous schemes can suggest the intellectual, spiritual states, or the mysterious. The triads, as they contain all primary colors, imply completeness, unity of mind, body, and spirit, birth, death, and resurrection. The balanced primary triad of red, blue, and yellow was a scheme often used by the painters of the Renaissance to depict religious subjects, especially images of the holy family. If, however, the triad colors used are of equal intensities, the scheme can project revolution and dissention. Split complements imply dominance and recessiveness in human relationships and between the spiritual and the earthly.

There are many writings on color theory and color's psychological impact, as well as the many aspects of color use to consider, especially when we add the color variations possible with different media. If color theory and color media have not been explored, the option of a neutral scheme with the possibility of color accents can simplify a successful exploration and completion of this project.

At this point it is appropriate to discuss media. Cut paper is the optimum choice. Today construction and other heavy weight colored papers offer a wide choice of consistent color. Using scissors to cut geometric shapes from these papers frees students from the tyranny that fear of drawing often brings. Cut paper motifs can easily be altered to explore psychological impact of shape variation, moved to explore spatial, scale, and size

relationships, and easily replaced to consider color options and impact. The interaction of this media to manipulation is so direct, results and discovery are immediate.

Creating the illusion of here and there, or depth of field, does not necessitate a working knowledge of linear perspective. In fact, using the non-intimidating form of empirical perspective is much more effective with this project of simple abstracted shapes. Empirical perspective relies on those things that are readily observable such as variation in size (bigger is closer), to give the illusion of depth. Overlapping, intersecting parts, position on the page (those things closest to the bottom edge are perceived as being closest to the viewer), use of a diagonal ground line to suggest visual movement, and value shift along with a hierarchy of contrast to suggest atmospheric perspective, all contribute to the illusion of three dimensions on a two dimensioned piece of paper. An overlap of color theory and empirical perspective is the visual tendency of warm colors to advance and cool colors to recede.

Once a narrative choice is made, be it nursery rhyme, myth or fable, poem, song lyric, play, opera, short story or novel, be it complex or simple, the constraints of economy, set by size and length limitations, require the student to identify major content, themes, and mood, eliminate the non-essential, and simplify the remainder. Characters and action need to be identified and placed in the context and structure of the narrative. A simple outline or story board can help organize the introduction of place and character, rising action, climax, falling action and dénouement or outcome.

One of the great pleasures of this project is the reality of the finished book, an object that bridges 2D and 3D design concerns and can be held in the student's hands. The craft of making a book can be simple or complex, but actually one of the simpler forms, the foldout or accordion book, lends itself admirably to visually addressing the serial literary aspects of introduction, rising action, climax, and falling action. The foldout format encourages visual flow, making the relationships between the design elements and principles of movement and rhythm, unity, variety, balance, emphasis, economy, scale and proportion easy to visually understand. Design as gestalt can be seen as one page folds out to the next and the whole is revealed.

The ever-important aspect of crafting secures the success of the final physical product. Concerns of measuring, cutting, folding, gluing, and assembling need to be stressed and, in most situations, demonstrated. For the motivated student possibilities of pop out and moving parts can add further technical challenges and richness to this project. The covers front and back should carry subtle signage or motifs derived from the visualized narrative, announcing and inviting entrance. In other words, the book cover can be considered as doorway or threshold. The outside should relate to inside. Placement of imagery may inform the reader or viewer where and how to open the cover. These concerns can lead to consideration of the book cover as an important design project in itself.

Possibilities of cross curriculum collaboration abound with these simple yet sophisticated books. Consider their use with literature based courses at any age level. They easily

become a vehicle for designing stage sets in the performing arts. For commentary on visualizing musical compositions refer to Kandinsky and his writings in *Concerning The Spiritual In Art*.

This project can become a means of connecting with elderly as a vehicle for recording life experiences and stories, as well as an aid to helping victims of physical and emotional trauma. This project easily adapts into a visual means of reinforcing history and geography studies. Certainly, it can be used as a means of connecting peoples with language barriers. Used as collaborative projects, it can be a means of helping community groups come together to visualize goals. The use of this project, for example, in the discipline specific context of landscape architecture can help clarify the association of narrative with the landscape. Making visual connections to the story of a place may suggest how applied design can help preserve the history and emotional attachments to place while dealing with landscape concerns of approach, entrance, edges, spaces, connections, serial movement, and exit.

Conclusion:

Students of all ages and experience levels have success with this project.

The personal retelling/interpretation of the narrative along with the crafting and making of an actual object encourages design exploration and a sense of ownership in the design process. By the conclusion of the project, students have an increased understanding of the use of abstraction and increased confidence in their ability to convert complex themes, emotions, and content into meaningful design.

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**We Never Have Been Pre-Disciplinary
Beginnings and Disciplinarity**

Once Upon A Shape, or A Picture Is Worth A thousand Words

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Cecile L.K. Martin, Assistant Professor, currently teaches design and graphics in the School of Environmental Design at the University of Georgia. She has a BS in Art Education from Kutztown University, PA, and an M.F.A from Clemson University, SC. Her major area of research and creative interest focuses on the manipulation of graphic media.

